

Work: The Corruption or Perfection of the Human Being?

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It is precisely the glorification of work which troubles me.
—Paul Ricoeur

The Question

THE QUESTION MARK placed behind the topic discussed here, *Work: The Corruption or Perfection of the Human Being?*, raises the possibility of alternatives to viewing labor as *either* the ultimate corruption or the ultimate perfection of the human being. Is labor too mundane and secular an activity to be either?¹ Or can it at different times be both, depending on the varying conditions of human justice and divine grace? Have

¹ The following essay presents the slightly revised version of the original text previously published only in Spanish translation: “¿El trabajo es la corrupción o la perfección del ser humano?” in Juan Jesús Borobia, Miguel Lluch, José Ignacio Murillo, and Eduardo Terrasa, eds., *Idea cristiana del hombre* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2002), 267–83. Cf. John R. Meyer, “Striving for Personal Sanctity through Work,” *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 85–106, for his equally critical references to two opposing extremes. The article refers on the one hand, e.g., p. 86, n. 4, to the denial of the self-transcendence of the worker by M. Volf, *Work in the Spirit. Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), especially pp. 195–201. On the other hand, in note 5 on the same page, Meyer points out the excessive sacralization of work in E. S. Dale, *Bringing Heaven down to Earth: A Practical Spirituality of Work* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). For Thomistically inspired literature between 1924 and 1971 on the theme of work cf. Meyer, 85, n. 3, with references to J. de Finance, H. Rondet, P. Delhay, J. Janssen, B. Montagnes, G. Todoli, E. D. Almeida, and K.V. Truhlar; cf. Sylvester Michael Killeen, *The Philosophy of Labor According to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1939).

romantic expectations of the perfective potential of our work (Marxist, National Socialist, or capitalist), has the “pathos” of the authenticity of our works (existentialist), led to an exaggerated disappointment in the reality of work?² Were utopian exaggerations of work’s perfective potential always better suited to underline a dissatisfaction with that corruptive reality of work which many, if not most, workers experience, at least now and again, as their own? Does a utopian view of work foster or undermine a sense of work’s dignity?³ Does the ecologically cautious “principle of responsibility” (H. Jonas)⁴ need to wait to express itself until the technologically adventurous “principle of hope” (E. Bloch)⁵ renders it all too obvious? Is leisure (J. Pieper)⁶ or is work (Y. Simon)⁷ the “basis of culture”; or does culture proceed from both work and its interruption?⁸ Is the divine paradigm of the human artisan the creator working on six days or the creator resting on the seventh?⁹ Do we need to accept that striking consensus between the harshest critics (including C. Boff)¹⁰ and

² Cf.—despite its polemical excess—Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964/1980).

³ Cf. Robert Spaemann, *Zur Kritik der politischen Utopie* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1977); and R. Schenk, “The Ethics of Robert Spaemann in the Context of Recent Philosophy,” in Brian J. Shanley, ed., *One Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 156–68.

⁴ Cf. Robert Spaemann, “Laudatio,” *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* 1987. Hans Jonas (Frankfurt a. M.: Boersenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 1987).

⁵ Though with more direct reference to political praxis than to technological poesis cf. Richard Schaeffler, *Was dürfen wir hoffen? Die katholische Theologie der Hoffnung zwischen Blochs utopischem Denken und der reformatorischen Rechtfertigungslehre* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979).

⁶ Cf. Josef Pieper, *Musse und Kult* (Munich: Koesel, 1948; seventh edition, Munich: Koesel, 1965), translated into English as *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1963).

⁷ Cf. Yves Simon, *Work, Society, and Culture* (ed. Vukan Kuic, New York: Fordham University Press, 1971; against J. Pieper, cf. 185 ff.); idem, *Trois leçons sur le travail* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1938; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1990).

⁸ John A. Gueguen, “Parallels on Work, Theory, and Practice in Yves R. Simon and John Paul II,” in Michael D. Torre, ed., *Freedom in the Modern World: Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon, Mortimer J. Adler* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1990), 153–61; for Simon’s arguments against J. Pieper, cf. 159.

⁹ On Robert Spaemann’s arguments for continuing to cultivate Sunday as a day of rest cf. Christian Nuernberger, *Die Machtwirtschaft. Ist die Marktwirtschaft noch zu retten?* (Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 208–10; cf. Juergen Moltmann’s arguments for viewing the sabbath as the crown of creation, *Gott der Schoepfung. Oekologische Schoepfungslehre* (third edition, Munich: Kaiser, 1987), e.g., p. 45.

¹⁰ Cf. Clodovis M. Boff, OSM, “La Iglesia militante de Juan Pablo II y la Capitalismo triunfante. Relectura de la encíclica ‘Centesimus Annus’ desde el Tercer Mundo,” (trans. Ana Guarnerio) *Revista Electrónica Latinoamericana de Teología*

the most enthusiastic reviewers (such as M. Novak)¹¹ of *Centesimus Annus* that the entrepreneurial creation of laboring possibilities can be encouraged only by forgetting those dangers to the laborer once enunciated by *Laborem exercens* and by that landmark encyclical of 1891, which the two later encyclicals cited had been written to commemorate?¹² Have recent papal concerns about the lack of opportunities for work replaced or merely complemented the papal concerns prior to 1989 about overworking the *homo faber* and his environment? More widely, does the recovery of a genuinely Christian sense of secular vocation (St. Josemaría Escrivá¹³ or, less programmatically, Eberhard Jüngel)¹⁴ or even of the possible sanctification of work need to contradict the monastic primacy of contemplation over action or to abandon the significance attached to the Augustinian distinction between ultimate and penultimate goods (the

(1992); or S. Prakash Sethi and Paul Steidlmeier, "Religion's Moral Compass and a Just Economic Order: Reflections on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*," in *Journal of Business Ethics* 12 (1993): 901–17. The author of these present reflections wishes to thank to his *confrater*, Michael Sherwin, OP, for his help on several aspects of the current discussion, including the character and controversial reception of *Centesimus Annus*.

¹¹ Cf. Stephen M. Krason, "Centesimus Annus: Maintaining the Continuity of Catholic Social Teaching—a Response to Professor Michael Novak," *Faith & Reason* 17 (1991): 371–87.

¹² Cf. R. H. Preston, "Centesimus Annus: An Appraisal," *Theology* 95 (1992): 405–16; and Stanley Hauerwas, "In praise of *Centesimus Annus*," *Theology* 95 (1992): 416–32; for an excessively harsh critique of the former's doubts about the merits of communitarianism cf. Michal S. Northcott, "Preston and Hauerwas on *Centesimus Annus*. Reflections on the Incommensurability of the Liberal and Post-Liberal Mind," *Theology* 96 (1993): 27–35. For nonlibertarian yet antitotalitarian motivations for seeking as little state as possible (even if as much as necessary) in the regulation of labor, cf. Russell Hittinger, "The Pope and the Liberal State," in *First Things* (1992): 33–41; and Ernest L. Fortin, "From *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*: Continuity or Discontinuity?" *Faith & Reason* (1991): 399–412. For the direction of papal teaching prior to John Paul II cf. Edwin G. Kaiser, *Theology of Work* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966); for John Paul II's sources cf. S. Wyszynski, *Work* (Chicago: Scepter, 1960).

¹³ Cf. the many references in John R. Meyer, "Striving for Personal Sanctity Through Work," especially in notes 2, 6, 16, 17, 24, 41, 68, 71, 77, and 87.

¹⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, "Gewinn im Himmel und auf Erden. Theologische Bemerkungen zum Streben nach Gewinn," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 94 (1997): 532–52, cited here from E. Jüngel, *Indikative der Gnade—Imperative der Freiheit. Theologische Erörterungen IV* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001): 231–51. On Luther and Calvin's antimonastic re-evaluation of secular professions as divinely inspired vocations, cf. 233–35, and Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, "Arbeit. VI. Reformation und (lutherische) Orthodoxie," in *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie* III (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1978): 635–39, with literature.

frui/uti discretion)? Does the link between the commandments to love God and also neighbor constitute the kind of unity in which the categorical love of neighbor becomes the modus of charity preferred to the otherwise vague, “merely transcendental” love of God?¹⁵ Is that conclusion valid which has been drawn by some writers of the post-Vatican II era (arguably, not the more literal readers of K. Rahner): that we should largely replace divine worship with social work?

Even in this initial and merely aporetic form, these questions of recent years point toward an ambivalence about work, developing and yet taxing both humans beings and their environment, a blessing and a curse for all, leading to the exaltation and the excoriation of the *homo faber*. This fundamental ambivalence about human workers and their works is by no means new. The same ambivalence echoed down the centuries from the famous chorus early in Sophocle’s *Antigone*, which wonders at the uncanny and the all too efficiently violent character of the human being in the midst of a nature far less uncanny and violent.

Numberless wonders, terrible wonders, walk the world, but none the match for man. . . .

And the oldest of the gods he wears away—the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible—as his plows go back and forth, year in, year out, with the breed of stallions turning up the furrows. . . .

Man the master, ingenious past all measure; past all dreams: the skills within his grasp. He forges on, now to destruction, now again to greatness.¹⁶

A similar tone of wonder at the violent efficiency of the human being at work, “now to destruction, now again to greatness,” sounds for us in the Genesis passages about the *dominium terrae*, the vocation of the human, stated three times (Gen 1:26, 28; and 9:1 ff.), to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen 1: 26). While human work is shown to be “supralapsarian” and not merely the result of sin, it is the “infralapsarian” version of the vocation to the *dominium terrae* which reveals its most violent potential. The aitiological explanation of the origins of meat-eating expresses the writer’s wonder at the end of supralapsarian peace:

¹⁵ Cf. Karl Rahner, “Ueber die Einheit von Naechsten-und Gottesliebe,” in *Schriften zur Theologie* VI (Einsiedeln: 1965/1968): 277–98, in *Geist und Leben* 38 (1965): 168–85.

¹⁶ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1984): 76 f., l. 375–76, 382–85, 406–8.

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, now I give you everything. . . . And you, be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth and multiply in it." (9:1–3, 7)

The mission to *dominium terrae* will occupy us again shortly. But the authors of Genesis show their fascination by another feature of postlapsarian work, no less uncanny than the *dominium terrae*, but in a sense contrary to the all too efficient character of the violent *dominator*: the futility of much else about his work. The account of the creation, mission, and fall of the first parents does not aim at portraying work in itself or even in its infralapsarian condition as something that should not be at all. In his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann puts much weight on the juridical character of the punishment imposed on the first parents; unlike the serpent or the fields, they are not cursed but sentenced.¹⁷ Something Westermann sees as the final, redactional softening of an intermediate text, which had already expanded the simple expulsion from the garden into discrete curses. To this exemption from curse, an indirect sign of the dignity that God retains for the first parents after the fall (underlined by that right to juridical self-defense accorded them here by God), there corresponds the good retained even in those core human activities now made more laborious. This is true of the burdens placed on the woman as wife and mother (Gen 3:16). "Precisely there, where the woman found the fulfillment of her life, her honor and her joy, in her relation to her husband and as mother of her children, precisely here she finds not unclouded bliss, but pain, burden, submission, and subordination."¹⁸ The texts nevertheless portray these activities as blessings (e.g., as opposed to childlessness). The aitiological character of the text presupposes this: It is being asked here why these most blessed of activities should have anything burdensome about them, something as strange as that an animal should have to slither and crawl rather than walk. The sentence on the man is similar (Gen 3:17 ff.); indeed, Marie-Dominique Chenu draws attention to the common use in French and English for expressions like "to be in

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974) 348–51: "Only a human being is capable of being punished in the sense of a juridical process (the penal code of the covenant knows of no 'punishment' for animals); human beings alone are legal persons here" (351, translation mine).

¹⁸ Westermann, 358.

labor" (or "en travail").¹⁹ The text of Genesis 3 presupposes amazement that the activities of work should have anything burdensome about them at all. The curse upon the field is the means to execute on Adam this dual sentence of toil ("In the sweat of your face. . .") and partial futility ("Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you. . ."); but even this curse leaves labor its dignity and reward ("... you will eat bread"). What is left is the ambivalent blessing of work after the fall.

It can be admitted that, partly due to the fragmented vocabulary for the many scattered activities grouped by us under the generic title of

¹⁹ Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Arbeit," in Heinrich Fries, ed., *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe* I (Munich: Koesel, 1962), 75–86, here 76; bibliography on page 86. Cf. M.-D. Chenu, *Pour une Théologie du Travail* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), translated as *The Theology of Work: An Exploration* (Chicago: Regnery, 1966), which, however, attempts a theological reflection of work, but of work especially in its twentieth century development as progress perfective of the natural order. In this early work, Chenu emphasized the technological and human progress of current times to the point where he failed to trace those experiences of work's defects for contemporary workers and their world which recent developments had accentuated and which make more urgent and pressing than ever before the hope for a grace upon work and its effects not yet included in work itself. Judged from a later perspective, this early essay with its glorification of recent tendencies in work appears socially abstract ("gesellschaftsabstrakte") in its sociological analysis and too easily instrumentalized as ideology in its theological interpretation (so Werner Kraemer, "Arbeit/Freizeit," the first article of Peter Eicher, ed., *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, Vol. 1 (Munich: Koesel, 1984): 11–25, with literature, here 23). Differentiating more finely than in his monograph of 1955, Chenu himself shows a growing sense of the "ambivalence of work" (308) even when reworking the later essay cited above; cf. M.-D. Chenu, revising slightly his article on "Arbeit," from the *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe* for the article on "Arbeit," in Karl Rahner and Adolf Darlap, eds., *Sacramentum Mundi* I (Freiburg: Herder, 1967): 306–18 (with literature), e.g., 309: "Die Arbeit, die eine spontan und freudig vollzogene Taetigkeit sein sollte, ist in Wirklichkeit mit Beschwerde und Ueberwindung verbunden und traegt den Charakter der Strafe. Die Natur gehorcht dem Menschen nicht; die Beziehungen, die urspruenglich zu ihr bestanden, sind gebrochen. Die Erde ist nicht mehr jener wundervolle Garten, dessen Pflege Glueck vermittelt. Die spaetere Theologie der Erbsuende greift auf diese Erfahrungen zurueck" (cf. *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe*, "Arbeit," 78); and 110: The incarnation implies not only the elevation and increased value ("Aufwertung") of work, but also and at the same time its relativization or devaluation ("Abwertung"): "Eine Abwertung ergibt sich jedoch aus der Tatsache, dass das endgueltige Heil sich jenseits der Geschichte vollendet und das Reich Gottes einer anderen Ordnung zugehoert als die schoepferische Ausgestaltung der irdischen Wirklichkeit." Without stressing the point or tracing its specific consequences for today's worker or today's environment, the Chenu of the 1960s no longer seems to exempt the work of our technological age from a share in this relativity.

work, labor in general is “not an especially important theme” of the Old Testament. The corresponding warning against systematising these scattered references into a “biblical theology of work” is also well taken.²⁰ Nevertheless, the text of Genesis 1–3 was so prominent, that it must be legitimate to look for theological developments of the ambivalent character of work suggested there.

Marie-Dominique Chenu was among the first to attempt a genuinely theological reflection on labor, addressing more than the many ethical and political questions involved to include work as the central part of a broader reflection on the Christian idea of the human being. Part of this effort involved drawing attention to the impact of human labor not just on human or social subjectivity, but also on the world into which human beings are placed and which their work affects:

Work is thus the perfecting of the one who works. But no less radically, indeed, in the very objective reality of that world which work constructs, labor is also the transformation of things, a *perfectio operis*. This is an essential duality that theology loses sight of as soon as she begins to focus completely on the *perfectio operantis* and unconsciously neutralize the objective content of work.²¹

The distinction of human labor in its direct impact on human subjectivity and in its indirect impact on humanity via the impact that labor has on the nonhuman world is well-founded; it was employed as a structural device especially in paragraphs 4–6 of *Laborem exercens*. The distinction recalls St. Thomas’s analysis of human acts into immanent and transitive acts, itself an appropriation of the Aristotelian division of human acts into *praxis* on the one hand and *poiesis* (more often as *techne*) on the other. The distinction, however, does not imply that the perfection sought intentionally in both areas is ever achieved in either. Attention to this distinction, moreover, does not demand indifference to the distinction of nature from that grace which would be necessary to perfect it. Hope presupposes here the insight into the imperfections of both the worker and his work without salvation from without. In his earlier work, Chenu passes over this dimension of the problem too quickly in order to proceed to an ecumenically polemical question: “Why have modern theologians, acquiescing in the Lutheran distinction between nature and grace, almost entirely given up this view

²⁰ Cf. Horst Dieter Preuss, “Arbeit. I. Altes Testament,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie* III (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978): 613–18, here 613; cf., however, also Paul Lamarche, “Travail. I. Écriture sainte,” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* XV (Paris: 1991): 1186–190.

²¹ M. D. Chenu, “Arbeit,” *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe*, 81.

of the world as a natural frame and spiritual sphere of action for man in his work?"²² The following reflections will take up the more ambivalent view of work suggested by Chenu's later and more nuanced reflections on contemporary labor and ask about the limits and experienced defects of both the *perfectio operis* and the *perfectio operantis*.

Human Work: Perfecting or Corrupting the World?

After asserting that work is the key to the social question, no less in our day than in the nineteenth century, the encyclical *Laborem exercens* begins its own presentation of "Work and the Human Being" (Section II) with a detailed analysis (in §4) of the *dominium terrae* passages of Genesis 1, 26–28. While not grappling with the problematizing development of the idea by Genesis 9:2, the encyclical cites the texts of Genesis 1 on *dominium terrae* no fewer than sixteen times, far more than any other biblical or patristic text. "The expression 'subdue the earth' has an immense range," a tremendous significance.²³ If work is the key to the social question, the encyclical seems to say, then *dominium terrae* is the key to work.

That is a surprising fact, given the widespread view, however poorly founded, that precisely this text with its view of the right and call to subdue the earth is somehow the cause of today's environmental crisis. Sir Frank Fraser-Darling is representative of this common sentiment:

In taking on the Judeo-Christian religion, the human beings of the West have not only excluded from community with God and with themselves all the other living beings which do not belong to their species, but they have also developed the comfortable conviction that God has created all other living things for the use and enjoyment of human beings.²⁴

The *dominium* of Genesis 1 is assumed to be tyrannical, exercised solely for the sake of humanity's advantage in placing itself in the middle of the world and at the pinnacle of creation as creation's shining crown. Anachronistically, the environmental effects of today's technology are projected back onto the state of ancient technology when assessing the historical

²² Chenu, *The Theology of Work*, 20.

²³ *LE* 4.

²⁴ Frank Fraser-Darling, "Die Verantwortung des Menschen fuer seine Umwelt," in D. Birnbacher, ed., *Oekologie und Ethik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983): 9–19, here 12 (translation mine); cf. Lynn Townsend White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); idem, *Medieval Religion and Technology. Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); idem, *Machina ex deo. Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

intent and influence of the biblical call to *dominium terrae*. Historical forgetfulness misses the fact and significance that the most extremely exploitative interpretations of these biblical texts occurred at a time when thinkers had already begun to diminish the authority previously attributed to Scripture.

Only since the 18th century has the commission for human beings to represent the lordship of God in creation been transformed into a claim to the unrestricted power of control by humans over nature. This occurred at a time when the self-understanding of modern humanity was separating itself from its ties to the biblical God of creation.²⁵

Descartes references the text of Genesis in his call to assume a possessive dominion over nature; Francis Bacon calls for the “enslavement” of nature. For both, nature is passive and plastic to human reconstruction.²⁶ Even many theologians and environmentally conscious philosophers, rightly concerned about the effects of our technological world and fearing the worst about its Judeo-Christian origins,²⁷ have been ready to jettison the view of the human as that crown of creation with the vocation to *dominium terrae*. Juergen Moltmann, arguably the driving force in the World Council of Churches behind its movement for peace, justice, and the conservation of the environment, traces back what he sees as the anthropocentric misinterpretation of *dominium terrae* not to the Scriptures themselves but to their traditional reading:

The anthropocentric world-view, according to which heaven and earth were created for the sake of human beings and for which the human being is the crown of creation, is said by its proponents to be a biblical tradition. In fact, the view goes against the bible. For biblical, indeed, for both Jewish and Christian traditions, God has created the world for the sake of his own glory, and the crown of creation is not the human being, but the Sabbath.²⁸

²⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983): 75 (translation mine).

²⁶ Cf. Richard Schenk, “Der Mensch—die Dornenkrone der Schoepfung? Umweltzerstoerung aus theologischer Sicht,” in Vittorio Hoesle, et al., eds., *Nachhaltigkeit in der Oekologie. Wege in eine zukunftsfahige Welt* (Munich: Beck, 2001): 151–74, especially, 161.

²⁷ Cf. Carl Amery, *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums* (Reinbek: Rowholt, 1972); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is it too late? A Theology of Ecology* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1999); and Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, *Revolution for Nature: From the Environment to the Connatural World* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1993).

²⁸ J. Moltmann, *Gott der Schoepfung*, 45 (translation mine).

It would go beyond the scope of these reflections to trace the rise, scope, and critique of anthropocentric notions of creation in scholastic theology.²⁹ With his stress on the “*homo in medio*” served by both angels and nature, Peter Lombard (†1160) was clearly inspired by the *dominium terrae* texts: “*homo tamquam dominus et possessor; qui et omnibus praefendus erat.*”³⁰ A hundred years later, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas (both †1274) will take pains to qualify Peter Lombard’s anthropocentric emphasis. Bonaventure sees God’s glory served not only by human beatitude but by the wider “*glorificatio creaturae.*” In a reference to Genesis 1, the human “domination” (“*dominari*”) is meant to lead other creatures toward their own glorification; in this, it is a liberating moment for non-human creatures and humans alike that human fulfillment will come more from God than from these creatures. Some of the services offered by creatures include the night sky causing wonder in the human or the venomous snake or spider punishing him for sin: services which rarely diminish the pursuit of their own proper goals. Thomas, too, takes pains to stress the ordering of each creature to its own fulfillment; its goal here is chiefly God and only secondarily human advantage. The nontyrannical sense of power is anticipated already in the description of the angels, who exist here “for the sake of humans” only as the king is said to exist for the sake of the peasants and their peace.³¹ But it is the fulfillment of the whole differentiated universe, the fulfillment of the many species, explicitly said to go beyond the human species alone, which God names not just good, but “*valde bonum*” (Gen 1:31).³² In large degree, Bonaventure and Thomas succeeded in weaving together theocentric, anthropocentric, and cosmocentric motifs.

With the success of medieval theology in escaping the anthropocentric narrowness which might have doomed our *dominium terrae* to contribute more to the destruction than to the glory of the world, the limits of any human contribution in leading creatures to their fulfillment also becomes clear. Despite biotechnological phantasies of late, the human contribution to the *valde bonum* of the universe seems to consist more in conserving species than in reducing, combining, or altering them. Human involvement in the destruction of this earth is also easier to imagine than any contribution to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth; apocalyptic hope was ever a hope for the world coming vertically down from God. And yet, while the destructive potential of human

²⁹ Cf. the sketch in R. Schenk, “Der Mensch—die Dornenkrone der Schoepfung?”

³⁰ Petrus Lombardus, *Sententiae*, II, 1, 5 (ed. Grottaferrata, 1971).

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, 1, 2, 3 ad 3.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 64.

labor might be more dramatic than its creative potential, a limited contribution to the *perfectio operis* cannot be denied; indeed, this *symbiosis* seems to have numbered among the goods aimed at by creation. Its success will be measured by its capacity to continue weaving together theocentric, anthropocentric, and cosmocentric motifs.

Human Work: Perfecting or Corrupting Human Beings?

At least since Aristotle, the distinction has been drawn, on the one hand, between actions of a *praxis* remaining within the actor or, as in much of political action, within the actors; and, on the other hand, the kind of productive or transitive action proper to the main paradigms of physical labor and industrial technology. Despite the unquestioned validity of this generic distinction between doing and making, between *praxis* and *poiesis*, it should not be forgotten that even productive efforts begin as immanent operations and share in all the features of properly human acts. Whether one works at the ballet or the steel mill, at the courthouse or on the farm, at the university, the loading dock, or the cathedral, whatever our particular blend of *otium* and *negotium* might be, our intentional works are *actus humani*. They are moral acts, good or evil; well or badly, they aim at happiness. As such, they also share the unavoidable and insatiable sense of discontent and restlessness stemming from that lack of complete correspondence between ultimate aim and at best penultimate achievement, which in different ways has been thematized by M. Blondel's *L'Action*,³³ H. Arendt's *The Human Condition*,³⁴ and Theodore Haecker's *Vergil, Vater des Abendlandes*.³⁵ This necessary *discrimen* between ultimate aim and proximate accomplishment holds true for the remote accomplishment mediated by our works, the perfective goal symbolically behind the proximate goal of every action, immanent or transitive. The answer to why we want what we want, the ultimate *perfectio operantis*, is at best partially obtained by our actions and works. All that a genuinely Catholic theology has to say about things that *cannot* be merited in any way by the *actus humanus*,³⁶ taken together with all that such a theology says about the ways in which other human actions by God's grace can

³³ M. Blondel, *L'Action* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1893/1950).

³⁴ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958/1989), with the central distinction between the toil of "labor" and the politically situated plans of "work" and "action."

³⁵ Theodor Haecker, *Vergil, Vater des Abendlandes* (sixth edition, Munich: Koesel, 1948) especially chapter 3, 59–65.

³⁶ Cf. Joseph Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: "Merit" in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1995).

co-merit that eternal salvation, where grace crowns the gifts of an earlier grace, all this holds true for the relatively perfective dynamic of labor. What is usually discussed under the title of “work” and what is usually discussed under the title of “good works” must at some point converge; for both, their lasting and perfective merits are real but relative.³⁷

This holds true as well, where it is not the individual actor but a group, a part of the society, and finally the state which is acting or being impacted upon by the issues of work. As Josef Pieper once pointed out to an agreeable Arnold Gehlen,³⁸ the dynamics of compensation that Gehlen had diagnosed for that “Maengelwesen,” the human being, had been addressed already by such writers as Avicenna, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas; for example, it is the opening theme of the Thomas’s *De regno*. Our innate lack of sure instincts about how to act or work in our given environment demands society, the opportunity to learn from the care, teaching, and shared experience of others; among other things, we learn from them how and why to work. Making virtue of necessity, this needy basis of sociability serves as the occasion for developing strengths that outweigh the weaknesses compensated for; not the least of these new strengths is language. Among the pioneers of “philosophical anthropology,” in the narrower sense of the term as a distinct school, Helmuth Plessner (with the key notion of eccentricity) and Adolf Portmann (portraying the first year of human life as an extra-uterine premature year) did much to complete the social dimension of this picture. Even the ways in which our individual labors fail at their immediate and proximate goals can (by new forces) be transformed into occasions for our perfection: It is here that, in the context of human and divine friendship answering and transcending our needs, we learn the significance that Thomas attached to Aristotle’s dictum: What we do through others we somehow do through ourselves.

In 1999, Alisdair MacIntyre picked up this thread again in *Dependent Rational Animals*, in part a Thomistic corrective to the all too ethereal

³⁷ Cf. the far-reaching claims about the Roman Catholic sense of the insufficiency of works and their corresponding need of a grace not immanent in them, in Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). One of the still outstanding ecumenical tasks is to compare Roman Catholic theology developed outside the explicitly ecumenical context with the claims made about it in declarations of ecumenical convergence. The theology of work would provide an exemplary starting point.

³⁸ Cf. the “Einfuehrung” (no. 3) to the second edition of Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, here in the 13th edition (Wiesbaden: 1986): 35.

read of virtue as a free narrative art form in his widely discussed work *After Virtue*, of 1981. Now less dismissive of Aristotle's "metaphysical biology," *Dependent Rational Animals* seeks to develop "virtues of acknowledged dependence," which answer to past and possibly future times of our own vulnerability and need by practicing solidarity with others who are actually or potentially vulnerable. Like H. Arendt, MacIntyre sees the need for the state to protect the rights of solidarity that grow from the social context of work, not leaving the initiative entirely to the whims of private, societal forces. Unlike Arendt, MacIntyre stresses the reasons that urge us to respond to the claims of solidarity on the most personal level, with as much subsidiarity as possible. MacIntyre is less trusting of the state than Arendt, who distrusts private enterprise and merely social forces to a greater degree. MacIntyre's book could serve as a warning to those who see an outright contradiction between the encyclicals of 1981 and 1991 cited at the outset: The need for legislation and political direction (say, to safeguard the rights of labor) need not exclude entrepreneurial initiative (say, to imagine and develop opportunities for labor).

This experience of the need for and the ties to the human other in the face of otherwise unaccomplishable tasks has its parallel in the context of the "sanctification of work." The need for grace underlined by the *discrimen* of what is sought in work for the perfection of the worker and what is found there, between what Blondel termed the willing will (*volonté voulante*) and the willed will (*volonté voulue*), not only reveals the being of deficiency (Gehlen's "Maengelwesen") to itself, but it provides a new basis for friendship between human beings and their God. Work is sanctified not by exaggerating its strengths, but by seeking to compensate its weaknesses, by dedication to its symbolic but unattainable goals. That lack of easy accomplishment in work, suggested by Th. Haecker's interpretation of Vergil's notion of "labor improbus," or unrequited toil, with the lack of control and efficacy in reshaping the other, provides the same kind of "witness" to the possibility of a qualified self that Paul Ricoeur recently identified in the "scattered witnesses" to personal dignity to be found in the conscience, my body, and other persons.³⁹ In each case, it is the acknowledged lack of plasticity or docile cooperation with my subjective plans for the transformation of the other which offers not just a hindrance, but a chance for perfecting the self, a self which becomes more profound the more it relates to what it cannot

³⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: 1992); cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Sinnesschwellen. Studien zur Phaenomenologie des Fremden* 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), especially 86–101: "Spielraume von Kunst und Technik."

simply remake and revise; the commitment to nonrevisionist history would be another witness to this kind of qualified selfhood, one which would not seek to repress its earlier history.⁴⁰ What seemed to be a case of corrupting my hopes becomes here the occasion of their perfection.⁴¹ Should we not see work, precisely in its lack of plasticity to form others and be formed itself according to our subjective desires, as still another such witness to and opportunity for the possibility of a qualified self?

Gracing the Ambivalence of Workers and Their Works

It was perhaps this sense of work as both corruption *and* perfection which in 1953 was already behind P. Ricoeur's reflections in his essay on "Work and the Word." "The discovery or rediscovery of man as worker is one of the great events of contemporary thought. . . . From this standpoint, work designates the entire human condition of man."⁴² However, Ricoeur sees in this expansion of the notion of work not only the inflation of a concept, but "a sort of overzealousness."⁴³ "It is precisely this glorification of work which troubles me."⁴⁴ Ricoeur remains closer to Marx's analysis of the self-alienation imposed by work in the industrial age than to the enthusiasm of the earlier Chenu; he shares with the later works of Chenu a heightened sense of the limits imposed on workers and their world by labor, especially in the fragmenting dynamic of its contemporary reality. To show the limits and the possibilities of work, Ricoeur analyses its close association with the spoken word, which, as different from work and more expressive of its needs and goals, both "justifies *and* challenges the glory of work."⁴⁵ As more comprehensive, the word can critique the ever-unfinished business of work;⁴⁶ but, articulating work's imperfection, the word can also ask for the grace to attain

⁴⁰ A work on the significance of the "passé," of that history which cannot be retrieved into a positive intention, translated into German as Paul Ricœur, *Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit. Erinnern—Vergessen—Verzeihen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1998).

⁴¹ Cf. Thomas Sterns Eliot, "East Coker," from: "The Four Quartets," in: *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952) 127: "Our only help is the disease/If we obey the dying nurse/Whose constant care is not to please/ But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,/And that, to be restored our sickness must grow worse."

⁴² P. Ricoeur, "Work and the Word," in *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 198.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 199 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 202: "The word which is closest to work, the imperative word, is in its nascent state already a *critique* of work in the double sense of a judgement about and an imposition of limits."

its perfective intent. In the “dubitative,” or self-doubting, appeal to the Other,⁴⁷ and especially in the optative invocation of the divine,⁴⁸ the word renders to work that service of communication necessary for any genuine hope of perfection.⁴⁹ The much-needed search for the “civilization of work” will have to seek ways to inscribe the realities of today’s isolating and alienating, wage-based and all too specialized work back into genuinely human communication, including the optative and invocative uses of a language directed to what is beyond what work itself can accomplish, even communally. “A first service of the word within the realm of work may be looked upon as a *corrective* of the division of work. . . . The second service of the word is to compensate by leisure for the division of work,” while saving leisure from the same trivialization and fragmentation which work itself has suffered.⁵⁰ In this effort of the word’s service to the world of work,

two serious “mystifications” are to be avoided. The first consists in making the whole of culture the celebration of the technological enterprise and, to speak plainly, a factor of industrialization . . . ; this new fetish which is offered for our admiration under the lofty label of civilization of work must be challenged. The second mystification consists of confusing a culture inspired by work and nourished by workers with a culture directed by ideology. This danger is the extreme form of the preceding one. . . .⁵¹

The fragmentation of ancient crafts into partial and repetitious tasks which demand less and less professional qualification raises a disturbing problem. The philosopher’s and theologian’s eulogy of work must not lose itself in the clouds, not at the very moment when an ever-increasing mass of workers tends to consider its work as a mere social sacrifice which no longer has meaning and joy in itself, but outside of itself: in the enjoyment of the consumer and the pleasures of leisure time won through the shortening of the workday.⁵²

It is language which first enables the worker to articulate which perfections aimed at in work have eluded us and where work’s “failure and suffering plunge man into reflection and questioning. . . . Language anticipates, signifies, and assays all transformations within the imagination, within this inventive void opened by failure and the interrogation of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 205 ff.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 208 ff.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 216 ff.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 216 ff.

⁵¹ Ibid., 215.

⁵² Ibid., 211 ff.

failure.”⁵³ Dubitative language can suspend the immediate pursuit of a practical concern, but “it returns to this concern on the level of signs.”⁵⁴ To inscribe the world of work into the world of words is to develop in manifold ways the symbolic dynamic always implicit in work.⁵⁵ The necessary location of work within the political sphere, stressed from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to such contrary thinkers as A. Gehlen and H. Arendt, is urged and made possible by this encompassing context of language addressing the unfulfilled hopes of work; work becomes political as the result of human need.

A genuinely Christian idea of the human being will seek an understanding of work alternative to the extremes of that existentialism, which would place all the value of work on an individually subjective authenticity asserted desperately amidst enterprises that are thought to be objectively and communally futile, and of the ideologies implied by the extreme forms of capitalism and collectivism with their parallel narratives of perfection by the self-made man and the self-made world. The Christian alternative must be sought in the symbolic value of work, contributing toward a perfection which it experiences as necessarily elusive to its own dynamic, but possible as a gift which allows it to be a partially effective sign of the perfection it seeks: in the tension between being merely a symbol and yet truly a symbol. Taken as an exclusively human activity, discourse itself cannot long escape the experience of its own limits and its many mistaken directions; indeed, the world of the word can be helped in part by the world of work to escape some of its own delusions, dead-ends, and vanities.⁵⁶ But at some point it must inscribe even these strengths and limits of verbal symbols in a higher symbolic task, the

⁵³ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 203; cf. Wilhelm Schapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* (Wiesbaden: B. Heymann, 1976; here Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1985), developing what Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) had said about the referential character of tools.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944, 1972); and Enno Rudolf, “Symbol und Geschichte. Cassirers Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie.” in Wolfgang Voegelé, ed., “*Die Gegensätze schließen einander nicht aus, sondern verweisen aufeinander.*” *Ernst Cassirers Symboltheorie und die Frage nach Pluralismus und Differenz* (Loccum: Evangelische Akademie, 1999): 9–23.

⁵⁶ Besides Heidegger’s constant references in *Sein und Zeit* to the manifold primacy of praxis over theory, as well as Max Scheler’s reflections in *Erkenntnis und Arbeit* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1977); and *Gesammelte Schriften* (Bern/Munich: Francke, 1976), vol. 8, pg. 191–82), cf. P. Ricoeur, “Work and the Word,” 215: “A civilization of work therefore also involves the correction of the miseries of the word by means of the virtues of work.”

symbol of hope implied in having tried to use symbols well. Less than the immanent fulfillment suggested by the idea of a *Realsymbol*, we experience through the reflections of language that the contributions of our words and works lag behind the perfections they seek. The experience of this gap between intent and realization can itself be a grace, transforming it into a more “inventive void.”

Is it possible that a theology of the word coincides in the end with a theology of work? Perhaps. But this means primarily that in human finitude we have need both of work and of the word in order to situate ourselves in the direction of a creative word which we are not.⁵⁷

As Theodor Haecker summed up his reflections on the ancient notion of *labor improbus*, reformulated in 1931 into a challenge to the rising ideology of the National Socialist German Workers' Party: “The victory of genuine work turns out to be the victory of grace.”⁵⁸ N-V

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, “Work and the Word,” 219.

⁵⁸ Haecker, *Vergil, Vater des Abendlandes*, 65.

